



Peter Brown

Bath between the Snows

Ninety-six new paintings, drawings and pastels celebrating the streets and hills of Bath captured in all weathers will form the basis of Peter Brown's new solo exhibition.

The works of art include views of George Street, Victoria Park, Milsom Street, experiencing sunshine and showers, and the Kennet & Avon Canal. There are even some night scenes.

This is the fifth exhibition by Bath-based artist Peter Brown (more commonly known as 'Pete the Street' due to his habit of working outdoors come rain, sleet or shine) to be shown at the Victoria Art Gallery, but by far the largest to date for it will fill the Bridge Street venue's large ground floor gallery. The exhibition is called *Bath between the Snows* because most of the work was undertaken between the two heavy snowfalls that occurred at the beginning and end of 2010.

Bath is not a large city, indeed, some might describe it as bijou, yet Pete never ceases to discover parts he has not previously painted, or, alternatively, familiar views seen in unfamiliar lighting conditions.

Jonathan Benington, Manager of the Victoria Art Gallery, said, "The pictures are anything but static scenes, recording as they do places that are populated, alive, throbbing with movement, constantly changing in response to different light and weather conditions."

Pete says of his work, "The thread in all my paintings is an interest in light. I relish the variety of our British climate and dramatic changes in the weather."

Although Pete now enjoys a national reputation and has completed a stint as 'Painter in Residence' at the Savoy Hotel in London, he can still be glimpsed painting 'en plein air' around the city that is his home.

He is a member of the New English Art Club, the Royal Institute of Oil Painters and The Pastel Society. He regularly wins awards for his work and is represented in collections across Europe, the USA, Australia and Saudi Arabia.

As well as regularly exhibiting with the NEAC, the RBA and the Pastel Society, Pete has been a finalist with the Hunting art prizes since 1997 and was shown at an Arts Club Award Winners exhibition in 2005.

Jonathan Benington on Pete Brown...

It is easy to be deceived by a Pete Brown painting. We see him using the street as his studio, painstakingly capturing the tones, colours and textures of the scene in front of him (whilst somehow managing to chat to bystanders and not let the interruptions ruin his

concentration). The results might look, in close up, like an abstract welter of strokes, smudges and dabs of paint, but standing further back, we realise that these marks form a visual Morse code or shorthand, and that our own eyes miraculously fill in the gaps, allowing us to 'read' the information in complete and unabbreviated form. Canaletto achieved the same result with his figures constructed from a few judiciously placed 'blobs' of paint, whilst Rembrandt's evocation of furs and lace conjured the effect of detail without needing to delineate the individual hairs and patterns. It is more than just sleight of hand – the elegant and sensuous use of paint that came as second nature to the likes of Thomas Lawrence or John Singer Sargent. No, Pete Brown never sets out to dazzle us with painterly fireworks – he is too much a man of the street to want to resort to the kind of artistic swagger that impresses wealthy patrons. Instead, his particular brand of hand-eye co-ordination seems to be borne of the need to capture the essence of a scene quickly, before the light changes, the weather turns, or the crowd moves on. It requires years of experience and hard graft, not to say skill (Brown has now been painting the Bath 'scene' longer than his eminent precursor, Gainsborough), and it depends on an all-over approach that treats the entire composition as a unit, working it up in a series of stages: line drawing, tonal under-painting, and, finally, the insertion of darks and lights. It sounds straightforward, but it is not a method for the faint-hearted as it requires great confidence and an ability to focus on the essentials of a given subject. Too little information, and we would condemn the work as a sketch, too much information, and the result would lack the freshness and spontaneity that create so much of the interest in the scenes he chooses to depict.

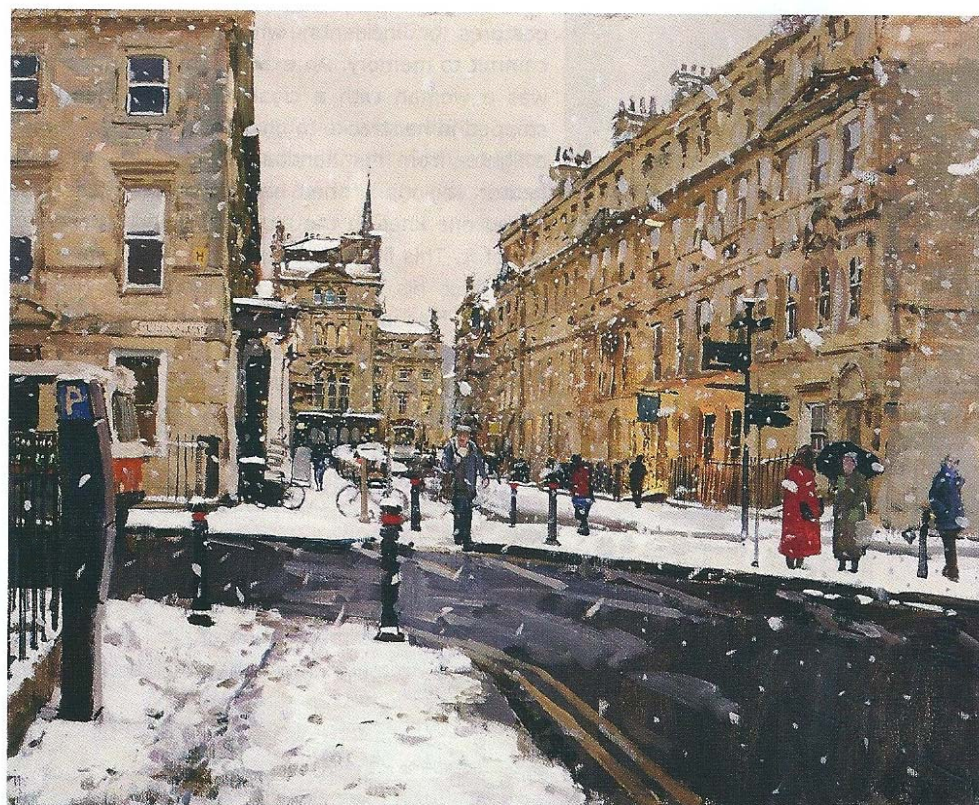
Ultimately, one has to accept that the hand cannot compete with the eye in terms of the speed at which it interprets and sends information to the brain. Art can only function as a metaphor for reality, but, of course, some painters are able to express it more convincingly than others – hence we say this picture makes us feel the cold, that one reminds us of a place we know, or another transports us to a place we do not know because the rendition of light is so tellingly observed. Pete Brown can do all these things, and more, for he has learnt to recreate visual experience using a seamless blend of observation and memory. And, here again, the acquisition of a skill was driven by necessity, in that key elements of the field of observation – the people, the vehicles, the clouds, the shadows – are not static, but rather in constant dynamic movement. This is especially the case in a busy place like Bath, with its three million visitors a year, its streets thronged with shoppers and roads clogged by traffic. Whilst the buildings are fixtures,

everything going on around them is in flux, so the challenge for anyone trying to capture this shifting environment in paint is to mentally freeze frame one or two fleeting moments, and then to recreate those moments retrospectively as brush marks on canvas. The time lapse that occurs between perception and painting might be minutes or even hours. It requires more than just visual shorthand to recollect and reconfigure the action accurately. How does Pete Brown do it? What is his method?

Acknowledging that Pete did not learn this skill at art school, but rather through the hard graft of learning by repeatedly doing, there are some interesting historical precedents of memory training targeted specifically at artists. The most influential exponent in the 19th century was Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran, who taught his students at the School of Decorative Arts in Paris a series of progressively more complex exercises. Memorising lines, then geometric shapes, then noses, whole faces, figures and finally famous works of art, the students were encouraged to apply whatever technique of recall worked best for them. Lecoq's personal approach was to draw the outline of an object or figure in the air, then to turn away and repeat the shape from memory. Whistler used to go on memorising expeditions with his pupil Sickert, gaze intently at his subject, then turn his back on it and enumerate its main features for his pupil to check against a list. When the verbal description and the list tallied, they could both go home. Rodin drew figures

opposite: The New Tree, Cleveland Place, Bath, 2010, oil on canvas

below: Milk Float and Snowfall, Queen Square, Bath, 2010, oil on canvas



right: Bright Afternoon from Belvedere, Bath, 2010, oil on canvas

opposite: Towards St Swithins, Bath, 2010, oil on canvas



in motion 'blindly', without looking at the paper. Methods such as these unfortunately died out with the increasing reliance on photography in the later 19th century, but Lecoq's treatises were still current in the Edwardian period thanks to a much delayed English translation.

Blissfully unaware of these memory-training pioneers, Pete Brown has had to devise his own method from scratch. The figures that populate his street scenes do reflect incidents that occur whilst he is painting, though not necessarily all at the same time. As he works, his eye is drawn to unusual gestures or incidents, which he finds easier to commit to memory. An example he described to me was a woman with a cigarette in her mouth who stopped in her tracks to give herself time to retrieve a lighter from her handbag; in order to reach the nether regions of her handbag more easily, she raised one knee in the air and propped the bag on top of it. This little vignette might be one of dozens that catch his eye as he observes the world from behind his easel, only to be subsequently recapitulated in paint (though without making a virtue of strangeness and difference à la Lowry, for example). Indeed, he even prefers the greater truthfulness of this method to those occasions when passers-by, having engaged in conversation with him, then ask if he could put them in the painting. What they fail to realise, of course, is that a static, self-conscious model is a departure from the norm in this situation. If they were minded to perform the function of artist's model conscientiously, they would repeat exactly their progress along the pavement before they stopped to chat!

Pete Brown's artistic progress in his adopted city is evident in the diverse body of work he has created

for this exhibition. For those with an eye to see, it is a city of constant surprises, and there is no one more receptive to these fleeting moments than 'Pete the Street'.

Pete Brown on Pete Brown...

My first stay in Bath was in 1986 for my year's foundation course. After completing our degrees in Manchester and a PGCE in South East London we returned in 1993. At this stage I had spent five years dabbling in Modernism, come to the conclusion that it was not for me and had truly given up the battle to try and understand 'Art'.

I don't remember the moment it happened, but at some stage in 1993/1994, moved by the city, I decided to buy a sketchpad and charcoal, and started drawing. I did not care whether it was or was not 'Art' anymore - my only reason and drive was from my heart. I had a real urge to capture what I saw.

I started away from public view on the outskirts looking in - the first drawing being a view from the canal path above Kensington Meadow towards Camden Crescent. I gradually built up my courage and slowly worked my way in to the centre. I had then the advantage of youthful arrogance (as I sit here now two months before my nth show opens at the age of forty-three, my head is full of doubts and anxiety) and when rejected by the local galleries, I took to the streets to sell to the passing public as I drew. It took months before anyone bought one of my drawings, mounted and cello-wrapped in the folder I lay out beside me as I drew. Unlike the moment I first decided to draw again, the day I first sold something I will never forget (perhaps that selective memory says a lot about me).

I was sitting by the corner of the Abbey in a biting wind. She gave me £45 for a drawing of Gay Street from the Circus. She lived in Saltford. Lisa and her friend, Fiona, had insisted on taking me for an Irish coffee at lunchtime and the sale was made in the afternoon when I returned, ignoring their protestations urging me to stay in the pub out of the cold - "Call it a day, Pete - It's way too cold out there. Have another...".

A year later I reckoned I could perhaps survive on these infrequent sales and, after a job offer which forced the issue and a weekend of serious chin rubbing in St Ives, we decided this would be it. Sixteen years on I have painted Cambridge, Oxford, Cardiff, Edinburgh, London (lots of London), the coast in Devon, Dorset and Sussex and, at the same time, steadily painted, drawn and painted Bath in the wind, rain, ice, snow and sun.

There have been times when I cannot face doing one more brushstroke of the city, when I have driven and walked for hours in desperate search for new inspiration and not found it. But I always return. I have to go away and come back, and when it does catch my eye, it does in a way that compels me to paint.

This city got me drawing with my heart again and, in fact, maybe, really, for the first time. It is a city of seasons: of shorts and sandals in the summer, of pushchairs and cafes, picnics in the park, students and wine, tourists and buses of skateboards, stunt bikes and scooters; in the winter of sledging and snowmen, frozen towpaths, long black shadows of peachy mornings and rose sunsets of misty autumn allotments and dew laden grass of spring mornings, and all this backed and illuminated by the oolitic limestone we call Bath Stone.

"Haven't you painted every street in Bath by now? Aren't you bored?"

Some people ski, some surf, bungee jump, watch sport, play sport, run, read, shop... I paint Bath from the hills that surround it to the pavements of Milsom Street, back out to the lower slopes and the canal, zooming in and out, from the hum of bees to the bustle of shoppers and the crackle of bicycle wheels on gravel; working on paper, board and canvas from 6" x 8" to 36" x 48"; in charcoal oils and occasionally ink; at dawn, at midday and at, perhaps my favourite time of day, twilight. I get my thrills from capturing fleeting moments: the first morning sun on Bath Stone; the silent transient snow that carpets the city uplighting the stone to a pale rose grey; and the thaw or heavy rain which weighs the ashlar to an

umber leaden black. These are the things that make me stop and put up the easel, that get my heart racing and produce the adrenaline that gives the painting that turbo start. The problem with turbo starts is invariably you crash into a wall but when you don't you slowly begin to calm down and observe. Very occasionally it all happens in one go - alla prima as my arty mates would say - but usually it happens over two, three or four sittings when I find similar light at the same time of day.

Over those sittings things happen: mums gossip, kids play, people walk by, vans park two feet in front of you...but rather than being a passive observer I am to an extent part of the action myself. Some people notice me and comment; some do not at all or have no interest. Children are always interested and ask all sorts of questions much to their parents' embarrassment. As the years have gone on in this small city, the passing comments have turned to short conversations with familiar faces and, most recently, to the stage where I set my easel up on Milsom Street and did not get to retrieve a brush from my paint box for two hours! But that is my life. I paint and I listen and I chat. I love it.

Bath between the Snows runs Saturday 9 April - Sunday 2 June at Victoria Art Gallery, Bridge Street, Bath, Avon, BA2 4AT. Telephone: +44 (0) 1225 477233. www.victoriagal.org.uk Open Tuesday - Saturday 10am - 5pm, Sunday 1.30pm - 5pm. Admission is free.

The exhibition, organised in association with Messum's and sponsored by Knight Frank estate agents, is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue (available 7 March).

